

Charles led us back down to the tents and lean-tos, people actually stepping out of our way as we moved. He didn't have to lead us far, as we very shortly stopped at one of the many nearby tents. Charles reached out and knocked on a nearby support beam. After a few seconds, a raspy voice came from inside.

"Come in..." The voice said, followed by a cough.

I gave Charles a look before gesturing to my mask and general get-up. It took him a moment to realize that, yes, a random masked man stepping into your tent would be shocking as hell and probably not the greatest start to process. Rather than scare the living crap out of whoever was inside, Charles stepped in first, and I joined him a minute later. The person inside was struggling to breathe, having caught some sort of upper respiratory infection that was filling his lungs with liquid. They had the common sense to lean him upright so he could breathe a bit easier, but that was all they could really do for him.

Thankfully, I could fix that.

A quick series of spells later, a man who was certain he would die on the streets when he woke up was praising me, god, and various other deities for a new lease on life. I assured him it was just a simple parahuman ability, and eventually, he calmed down. When we left his tent, his words of excitement and relief had attracted a large group, all of which were staring at me with wide eyes. Seeing that we were at the precipice of what could possibly turn into a clamor, I stepped forward to cut it off.

"I will not leave this camp until I have had a chance to examine anyone who is ill or injured," I assured the crowd. "We are starting with some of the worst cases first, but after that, I will see to everyone. Just please, have patience."

After a moment, people nodded, several of them dispersing back into the indoor shantytown. Others hung around to watch, probably to keep an eye on me in case I tried to break my promise. Once it was clear that we weren't about to be swamped by people looking to get healed first, I turned back to Charles.

"Who's next?"

Charles led me around the first warehouse and then through the second, guiding me to some of the unhealthiest and most at-risk people the community had. As before with John's group, there were a few things I couldn't cure. Thankfully, all of those cases had ways that I could treat some of their symptoms and ease their suffering.

After about an hour of walking around, Charles was sure we had gotten the worst of people, so we set up shop outside in the relatively fresh air. He sat me down in a folding chair, and a line of people looking for healing quickly formed around me.

It was nearly three hours before I was done, which I knew was way too long for just this community. Someone must have gone off to gather nearby people as well, pulling for the

homeless who preferred to live on their own. Charles nearly called people out on it, stopping some he recognized as not living in the community, but I stopped him.

"I'm glad they are going around getting people," I said with a shrug. "The point here is to help people who can't just go get help from doctors or even Panacea. I'm happy to spend all day here."

He looked a little shocked to hear that but, after a moment, nodded in understanding.

Eventually, after healing everything from broken bones to stomach ulcers, the line ran out. I stood and stretched, looking around to make sure no one else was coming.

"Well, that looks like everyone," I said with a smile. "Bit of a workout, but I'm glad I could help."

"You really are, aren't you?" He asked, looking at me with a frown. "I think I need to apologize. When you first arrived, I was sure you were just looking for a PR boost. I kept expecting news crews to show up or something. But you really stuck around and healed every one. Even that guy with a hangnail."

"Can you really blame him?" I asked with a chuckle. "If I knew someone was healing people and I had one, I would go get it fixed, too! He even had the decency to wait until the end!"

The man chuckled and shook his head, eventually nodding in agreement.

"Either way, thank you. It's nice to know not all of you are obsessed with fighting and looking good for pictures."

"I imagine I'm going to have to fight people eventually," I admitted after a long breath. "I wish I didn't have to, but... I don't really have an option. But I would like to do nothing but this, helping people around the city."

We stood there for a long moment, before eventually I remembered something.

"Listen, do you guys have any cellphones?" I asked.

"Yeah, we keep a couple of prepaid for emergencies," he said. "Why?"

"I want you guys to have my number. Call me immediately if it's an emergency. Otherwise, you can call me when normal injuries stack up," I explained. "I wish I could come out for every pulled muscle and bruise, but I have a feeling life is only going to get more busy for me."

He quickly took down my number before I went off to find Tony, who was having a very animated conversation about some sort of sports team with a few of the community members. I eventually pried him away, leaving the community behind. Several people tried to offer me gifts as I left, but I politely refused. I knew some people had issues receiving something for nothing, but I refused to set a precedent for healing the less fortunate for gifts or cash. I had no issues

charging insurance companies or hospitals for my abilities, but random people off of the street? Absolutely not.

We had been walking for fifteen minutes when Alya whispered something into my ear.

"You're being followed," She whispered, causing me to freeze up and almost stumble. "Looks like they were waiting for you to leave the community. I... think they are called the Undersiders."

As I recovered from almost tripping, I cursed under my breath and looked around. Unsurprisingly, all I could see were the walls of the alleyway. I tried my best to remember who exactly the Undersiders were, trying to recall the research I did. They had some sort of smoke conjurer, a dog master, and... two more that I couldn't remember.

"What is it?" Tony asked, picking up on my anxious looks. "Something wrong?"

"I think we are being followed," I commented, quickly putting some pep in my step, practically pulling Tony with me even as I whispered to Alya. "Did they see Tony?"

"I... don't think so," She responded. "The dogs are following your scent. They never really saw you."

"Where did they get my scent?"

"I don't know."

"It doesn't matter, anyways," I said, shaking my head. "Guide Tony away, towards Downtown."

"Arcanum, what is-" Tony began to ask, only to freeze as I assumed Alya started talking to him. He looked at me with wide eyes before nodding. "I'll call you later."

"Good, now go."

He nodded and left, jogging down the alleyways, turning a corner, and disappearing. Meanwhile, I turned around and walked back, stopping at a four-way intersection of alleyways, a space that slightly opened up. I spotted a junked and dumped washing machine, which I kicked over flat on its side, making it the perfect height to sit on. I quickly sat down, taking in a long breath and holding it for a few seconds before letting it all out.

The Undersiders were known as low-level villains, doing small jobs and occasionally raiding ABB assets. They were annoying, probably underselling their abilities, and usually chose to *run* rather than fight. I don't know *why* they were following me, but my best bet was to come off as confident as possible while preparing myself to run if need be.

I chewed the inside of my lip, feeling very alone with Alya focused on guiding Tony away, but I did my best to calmly wait for her to return. The temptation to head down a different alley was pretty strong, but if they were tracking my scent, then I didn't want to lead them anywhere close to where I lived.

A minute passed, then another. Finally, halfway through the third, Alya returned.

"They've stopped," She said softly. "They were arguing about approaching you now that they lost the surprise advantage."

"How do they know that?" I asked, confused, only to curse a moment later as I remembered. "Fuck, one of them is a thinker, aren't they? Dammit, I need to do more research."

"They are coming again, walking slowly."

"Okay... should I run?" I asked, my eyes locked down the alley they would be coming from. "I could probably outrun them. There's not really a point of hanging around."

"True, there really isn't," Alya agreed. "And yet... you're not going anywhere."

"...I don't like being followed," I said after a moment, a scowl working into my features behind my mask. "I want to know what the hell they are up to. Especially since it puts Tony at risk."

"What about their thinker?"

"I have a plan for that."

"Do you think you can beat them all?" She asked calmly.

"Unless their fourth has those monster dogs out already?" I asked, feeling a sense of negativity come from our connection. "In that case, I think I can hold them off long enough to run. Plus, you could always help even the playing field."

I could feel a sense of approval from Alya as the team of villains, all of them basically teenagers, came around the corner. There were four of them, all dressed in costumes. The first, the leader, was Grue, whose name I only remembered because of the reference. He was wearing a leather jacket, pants and gloves, with a modified bike helmet depicting something vaguely resembling what a grue looked like.

Behind him was a young woman, the thinker, dressed in a purple and black skin-tight suit. She was wearing a domino mask and a cocky smirk that got right under my skin immediately. Next was another young woman whose costume hardly counted as one, just a bomber jacket, t-shirt, and jeans. Her face was obscured by a simple party store wolf mask, and she was trailed by three dogs.

The last member, slinking around in the back, was a thin young man with a smiling theater drama mask on. His outfit was simple as well, a pair of slacks with a frilly collar jabot

around his neck. He was also the only one carrying anything, a scepter of some kind in his left hand.

They approached slowly, stopping just before entering the small open area at the four-way intersection.

"Hello," Grue said after a moment. "I-"

"Stop," I said simply. "I'm not saying a word more until your thinker leaves. At least a hundred yards."

The leader, Grue, froze at that statement, and the Thinker herself recoiled. I don't know if it was kid naivety or just a lack of planning, but they clearly hadn't considered that option. According to reports, Tattletale, the name just coming to me as I stared the group down, could pull information out of thin air. She claimed to be psychic, but most refuted that as a possibility. I'm sure if she was as good as what the online information seemed to indicate she was, she would still be able to figure some stuff out, but depriving her of access to me should help. The way they reacted to my request indicated I was right.

"I don't-"

I stood up from my spot and started to walk away, making it within a few steps of another alley before Grue spoke up.

"Tattletale, retreat," He said simply, and I stopped, turning around.

The girl whirled to look at her leader, staring daggers at him, before turning to look at me as well. She must have seen something because she flinched, turned around, and left, walking back the way they came. Grue opened his mouth to talk, but I held up my hand and waited. After a tense thirty seconds, Alya whispered that she was out of earshot.

"Good. Now, why were you following me?" I asked, not letting him get a word in.

"You were in our territory," He explained, his voice muffled by his helmet. I had the feeling he had to talk a bit louder than normal to be heard. "We needed to know what you were doing."

"I was healing the sick and injured at the homeless camp," I responded. "Weren't you watching me?"

"We were, we want to know why."

"Because I can heal people, and they had people that needed healing," I explained with a shrug. "Nothing more than that."

There was a silence after that, as if the group expected someone else to speak up. When no one did, I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Let me guess, that's when Tattletale would usually speak up and confirm if someone was telling the truth?" I asked, shaking my head when they didn't respond. "Someone's a bit spoiled."

"Fine, you were healing them from the goodness of your heart," He said, trying to regain his footing in the conversation. "How does your healing work?"

"Thoughts, prayers, and positive vibes," I responded, wiggling my fingers, Jazz Hands style. "Why would I tell you guys?"

"We are interested in hiring you, maybe even putting you on a retainer, in case one of us gets injured," He said. "We would be willing to pay a good chunk of money for your services."

I stared at them for a long moment before letting out a long breath and shaking my head.

"Look, I'm sure that whatever reason you guys are villains is complicated. Shit like this is rarely simple," I admitted with a shrug. "If I saw you dying on the street, yes, I would likely heal you. But I'm not going to sign some sort of contract to make house calls to people robbing stores and stirring up trouble. Just like I won't heal other villains or gang members."

"We understand," Grue said, giving me a nod. "Since we approached naturally, I assume we can leave like that?"

"Sure," I responded with a shrug. "I'm not going to be hunting people down, not unless I'm forced to."

He nodded, and together, the group slowly retreated, keeping a close eye on me as they did. Eventually, as the last of them disappeared around the corner, I finally released a long, slow breath.

"Kinda fucked that the best first impression I've had with parahumans has been with a bunch of kids playing at being villains," I said with a frown.